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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000130

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/IR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2019
TAGS: PREL IR AE
SUBJECT: UAE CITES IRAN RHETORIC AS UNJUSTIFIED

REFS: A) ABU DHABI 126, B) 08 ABU DHABI 1223, C) 08 ABU DHABI 998, D)
08 ABU DHABI 942

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Classified by Ambassador Richard Olson, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) The Iran Regional Presence Office (IRPO) in Dubai contributed to this message.

¶2. (C) Summary: A salvo of rhetorical barrages from Iran has reinvigorated references to disputed islands and highlighted the stricter handling of Iranian visitors by UAE immigration. Recent outbursts in this irregular exchange of claims and counterclaims emanated from the Iranian Majlis, which took umbrage at what deputies said were "expansionist" UAE claims on Iranian territory and indignities to Iranian citizens. Not prone to confrontation with its larger neighbor, the UAEG offered a measured reply, issued through the media by the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. Rhetoric remains the preferred method of issuing mutual challenges, with political emotions likely egged on by Iranian elections and commemorations of the revolution. End summary.

Iranian rhetoric sparks verbal escalation

¶3. (C) Sharp rhetoric is often Iran's response to a perceived insult or "threat" to its national interests. True to form, Iranian Majlis deputies issued several nationalist and cautionary statements criticizing the UAE over its claims to three disputed Gulf islands and complaints by Iranians over their treatment at UAE airports. Although neither of these issues are new, Majlis attention to them in a January 28 question-and-answer session with FM Manoucher Mottaki produced several sharp statements about the UAE (note: Mottaki was called to the Majlis to answer criticisms of the MFA's policy of "silence and inaction" in the face of "expansionist" UAE policies):

-- Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani was widely quoted as saying that mistreatment of Iranian citizens was a serious issue that would prompt Iran to reconsider its policies toward the UAE;

-- Majlis Deputy Darioush Qanbari compared the UAE's island claims to the designs Saddam Hussein had on Iranian territory and that the UAE "is seeking to endanger Iranian territorial integrity;"

-- Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee member Awad Haidar-Pour claimed that in addition to the three islands, all of the UAE's seven emirates belonged to Iran, according to one press report; and

-- Majlis Deputy Javad Jahangir Zadeh called on Iran to sever relations with the UAE and proposed to pursue legislation transferring Iran investment from Dubai to Turkey if the UAE continued to take "provocative actions" against Iranian citizens.

¶4. (C) These comments follow Iranian criticisms of Arab governments

for their "lack of response" to Israel's aggression in Gaza and against the backdrop of commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, adding to the already high degree of Iran's nationalistic sentiment heightened still further in an election environment. President Ahmadinejad also called for the U.S. to apologize for its past crimes in a speech in Khermanshah, and in a separate speech commemorating the revolution on January 30 he said the Islamic Revolution was not finished and not confined to Iran's borders.

The UAE responds

¶15. (SBU) Not wanting to let Iran's rhetoric against the UAE stand without offering UAE context, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr. Anwar Gargash addressed the media on January 31 (his remarks to al-Arabiya TV were repeated by the Emirates News Agency and in many papers February 1). Characterizing Iran's complaints as "neither understandable nor justified," he calmly suggested tamping down the bellicosity in the interest of long-standing cordial relations. Noting that Tehran's complaints may be related to "Iran's internal situation" or upcoming elections, he said such words do not serve "the interests of the existing relations" between the two neighbors.

¶16. (C) Gargash said Enhanced Iranian rhetoric on three disputed islands makes little sense since "this problem is 37 years old" and "the UAE stance on the issue remains unchanged from day one." Pressed on whether Iran might be serious about reeling back economic ties with the UAE, Gargash said "mature" bilateral relations quite naturally involve "areas of agreement and areas of disagreement." Bilateral cooperation and contact continue in areas of mutual interest. Pressed on stricter treatment of Iranian nationals at UAE airports, Gargash cited statistics evidencing that 27 percent of those arrested for smuggling narcotics into Dubai in 2008 were Iranians, necessitating particular caution. (Dubai Police Commandant

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Dhahi Khalfan recalled to the Ambassador January 28 that he uses this same rationale to explain strict immigration procedures to Iranian officials who complain of harassment. Khalfan said much of the trade was opium intended for personal use, and that Dubai simply refuses entry to some petty smugglers because it does not have jail space to house them.)

Comment: Rhetoric evidences real but manageable tension

¶17. (C) While some rhetoric from Tehran is clearly related to celebrations of the 30th anniversary of the revolution, and election fever has heightened nationalistic emotions, there is no doubt real angst underlying the war of words, including over the islands dispute (which Gargash notably brought to the fore with a rare public comment on the subject in Tehran at a NAM event in late July [ref D], followed by a series of verbal exchanges on the islands over the summer [ref C]). Anecdotes also suggest some redirecting of Iranian investment out of Dubai (ref B, para 4 notes the diversion of financial business, presumably due to sanctions). The UAE is indeed cracking down on Iranian travel -- often using the narcotics hazard as a plausible cover story for additional security checks. In a bilateral relationship squeezed by real world strategic interests, public perceptions, and a history of careful balancing, the current verbal battle is not necessarily destined to leave long-term scars, but neither does it bring long-time neighbors any closer to one another. End comment.

OLSON